Chapter 3: Issues of Gender Justice in Pre-Independence India: Social Reforms, Women’s Associations and the National Movement

3.1: Introductory Notes

In the previous chapter I discussed the gender-insensitivity and gender-bias in mainstream political theory, especially Rawls’ theory of social justice. I explored some major feminist theorisations and the feminist reconceptualisations of some important political concepts. I also examined the ethic of care as a feminist alternative to justice theory. These feminist interventions in political theory have been associated with women’s movements around the world. The emergence of the women’s movements has helped raise important questions of gender justice that seek solutions at the practical-political level. These obviously have a bearing on the theories of the political in general and of justice in particular. In India, as elsewhere, the women’s movement has brought some welcome interplay between political activism and academic theorisations. Hence an examination of the emergence and growth of Indian Women’s Movement (IWM) and of some specific issues of gender justice it has addressed become important to my study.
In this chapter, I present a brief overview of the women’s movement in colonial India. This essentially includes examining some issues of gender justice raised during the pre-Independence period, particularly in the social reform and nationalist movements, and how these movements addressed them. What is today generally and loosely called the Indian women’s movement (IWM) had its inception in the social reform movement of the nineteenth century. The social reform movement itself was not a single movement but rather was made up of several movements that dealt with issues of local importance. However, these reform movements can be said to have had a specific focus on women as almost all the issues that these movements dealt with challenged some unjust practice affecting women in the Indian society.

Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah have divided the Indian women’s movement into three phases or ‘waves’. The first wave deals with the movements in pre-Independence India, which had an orientation towards women’s issues. These include the movements for social reform and the movement for nationhood. The last two waves concern post-Independence India; the second wave from 1947-1970 and the third from 1971 till date. For analytical as well as practical purposes, I shall follow this division of the IWM.¹
I deal with the first phase of the IWM in this chapter. This phase is broadly divided into two parts; the emergence of the women’s movement in the social reform movement and its growth as a part of the national movement. The final two phases will be discussed in the subsequent chapters when I deal with the specific issues of gender inequality engaging the attention of the contemporary Indian women’s movement.

As Samita Sen notes:

Gender has been a central ‘issue’ in India since the colonial encounter. An overwhelming preoccupation with the ‘woman’s question’ arose from the 19th century social reform movement, crucially informed the anti-colonial nationalism, and remains a point of crisis in India’s cultural, social, and political space. The recognition of gender as an issue forms the basis for India’s women’s movement. ²

According to me a study of the IWM in the pre-Independence India is important mainly for three reasons. Firstly, the movements of this period for the first time raised issues of injustice towards women. The social reform movement acknowledged the backward and oppressed condition of women in the Indian society, and tried to improve it by opposing certain evil customs and practices of the time. The national movement carried this
question of women’s oppression further. It also witnessed the participation of women in activities outside their home. Women actively took part in several major movements such as the Non-cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India. This period also saw the rise of many women leaders.

Secondly, the study of the IWM in its first phase is important because the contemporary women’s movement has its roots in the movements of pre-Independence, and because there is a continuity between the two. Finally, this phase of the IWM formed the backdrop against which the Constitution was discussed and subsequently drafted, and which became the sole guarantor of equality rights and justice in independent India. It thus becomes imperative to briefly review of this period of Indian history from a feminist perspective.

3.2: Social Reforms and the ‘Woman’s Question’

The social reform movement can be called the cradle for the Indian women’s movement because of its preoccupation with the ‘woman’s question’, which came to dominate both the indigenous social reform as well as the colonialist discourses. According to Heimsath, the reformers of the early 19th century Bengal saw the position of the Hindu women as the most
exploitative, and their efforts mainly revolved round opposition to *sati* and encouragement to widow remarriage and female education.\(^3\)

The colonialist discourse itself was a product, firstly of the encounter of the British and the Indians. Secondly it was a product of the encounter between tradition and modernity. Such an encounter highlighted the differences between the two cultures. The movements for social reform emerged out of this confrontation. A significant aspect of this encounter was the difference in the condition of the women in the two cultures. Certain social customs and practices existing during the time came to be looked down upon as barbaric and inhumane. Some of these include the practice of *purdah*, *sati*, child-marriage, female infanticide, the oppressed condition of widows and the lack of educational opportunities to females. These practices were considered as markers of a pre-modern culture and civilization.

In an interesting analysis of gender, caste, class and state with reference to Brahminism in early India, Uma Chakravarti notes that though women's subordination is a feature of all societies around the world, the extent of this subordination and oppression is conditioned by the social and cultural environment of every society. According to Chakravarti, the general subordination of women in India was conditioned by religious traditions
that shaped social practices. She notes: “A marked feature of Hindu society is the legal sanction for an extreme expression of social stratification in which women and the lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence”. She identifies caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy as the interconnected organising principles of the brahminical social order.

While exploring the relationship between caste and gender, she argues that the main cause of subordination of women in early India was the need for ‘effective sexual control’ over women not only to maintain patrilineal succession but also to maintain caste purity. The purity of women was important for brahminical patriarchy because the purity of caste was contingent upon it. The caste structure had to be safeguarded by restricting the movement of women, which was one of the reasons for the keeping women in seclusion. The sexuality of upper caste women had to be guarded from the lower caste men, the failure of which would lead to a collapse of the entire social and moral order. Hence according to Chakravarti:

To prevent such a contingency women’s subordination was institutionalised in the brahminical law codes and enforced by the power of the state. At the same time women’s cooperation in the system was secured by various means: ideology, economic dependency on the male head of the family, class
privileges and veneration bestowed upon conforming and dependent women of the upper classes, and finally the use of force when required.⁵

Though this depicts the picture of early India, similar oppressive customs and practices were in vogue during the onset of the colonial rule. It is hardly surprising then, that this condition of women was the precise focus of the colonial criticism of Indian tradition and culture. Partha Chatterjee notes that the colonialist discourse was fundamentally constituted around the 'civilising mission'. The condemnation of the 'degenerate and barbaric' social practices formed the ideological justification for colonial rule. Chatterjee remarks:

In identifying this tradition as 'degenerate and barbaric' colonialist critics invariably repeated a long list of atrocities, perpetrated on Indian women, not so much by men or certain classes of men, but by an entire body of scriptural canons and ritual practices.⁶

The colonial rulers thus justified their rule over the country by transforming the oppressed womanhood to display the oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition. Such an onslaught on the tradition posed a
potential threat to the Indian identity. Attempts to preserve this identity and to display the indigenous capacity for self-rule, gradually and consequentially culminated in the social reform movement. The social reform movement was also a product various aspects of the colonial economy. A very significant aspect of the colonial rule, and which had a profound impact on the lives of women, was the emergence of a new colonial economy, with its changing agrarian and industrial relations. Sangari and Vaid note:

The compulsion of colonial rule to extract surplus, create classes conducive to its rule, to produce legitimising ideologies, led in part to an aggravation of existing unequal relations within many sections of Indian society.7

The colonial interventions in land revenue settlements also implied an intervention in local patriarchal practices, thereby initiating a social restructuring and reconstitution of patriarchies at all social levels. Sangari and Vaid mark that the land settlements worked at restricting the social and individual lives of women, which accounts for their widespread participation in later peasant struggles. One the one hand, women were being denied a control over means of production; on the other the matrilineal systems existing in some areas were gradually being transformed into patrilineal ones.
The new administrative structure set up by the colonial government, forged the existing dominant groups like traders and the gentry into a new middle class or the bourgeoisie. This Indian bourgeoisie class that developed under western influence initiated campaigns against unjust social practices. It began to view the prevalent customs and practices as being “elements of a pre-modern or primitive identity” as Radha Kumar observes. Hence, in order to reform itself, this class initiated campaigns against caste, polytheism, purdah, child-marriage, sati, widows’ oppression and other such oppressive practices.

In a bid to reform itself this bourgeois class undertook various campaigns challenging these unjust practices. However Everett notes that for this class “the position of women [also] became salient for the issue of political ascendancy and cultural identity”. During this period women’s lives became sites of discursive struggle. Women became the terrain on which tradition and reform was debated. The inclusion of the women’s cause in public discourse was a part of the modernity/tradition debate. Chatterjee opines:

The so-called women’s question in the agenda of Indian social reform in the early nineteenth century was not so much about the specific condition of women within a specific set of social relations as it was about the political encounter between a
colonial state and the supposed ‘tradition’ of a conquered people – a tradition that ... was itself produced by colonialist discourse.¹⁰

As mentioned earlier the social reform movement was not a uniform one. Different issues having local importance were taken up at different times. However most of the issues that the reform movement sought to address concerned the upper class/upper-caste Hindu women. The practices that the reformers challenged did not concern the low-caste, working, peasant and artisan women. These women unlike the upper-caste, were not governed by the Manu Smriti, but were governed by customary laws. The emphasis of the movement on legislative means and statutory social reform led to an erosion of these customary laws, which were replaced by an all-encompassing Hindu Law. The bases of this Hindu Law were the scriptures and sacred texts, which represented idealised brahminic norms. With the formulation of the Hindu Law, these stringent norms came to govern the lives of all ‘Hindu’ women, irrespective of caste and class. A significant and adverse implication of such legislation was the decline in the rights that the customary laws granted to women. For instance, since the Hindu Law did not recognise divorce, the low-caste and labouring class women were
deprived of the right to divorce and marriage after that, which they previously held.\textsuperscript{11}

There were quite a few legislations, which were a result of reformers’ crusade against certain unjust or exploitative practices. The first among them was the Age of Consent Act, which was passed in 1891. It was among the first social issues to arouse a countrywide debate. This debate was essentially a contest over women and sexuality. The Age of Consent Bill was introduced in the Legislative Council in 1891, which sought to raise the age of consent for sexual intercourse for Indian girls from ten to twelve years. The Bill did not deal with child marriage, which was seen as the root cause of widowhood, but dealt only with the premature consummation of child marriage.

This debate was conducted on the notions of female sexuality, wherein the woman’s body became the discursive terrain. It is interesting to note, as Uma Chakravarti does, that while the concept of ‘consent’ was being introduced within Hindu marriage, it was difficult to locate this ‘consent’. Chakravarti argues: “Did the wife, either in the past or now under the British dispensation, have the right to refuse the husband access to her once she was married?”\textsuperscript{12} The debate around the age of consent depicted that
neither the state nor the community considered 'consent' to be residing in the woman's decision to allow her husband sexual access to herself. The debate actually was about the regulation of female sexuality, which was controlled and supervised through the community. Hence opponents of the Bill like Tilak argued on the lines that female sexuality should remain the subject of community and caste control, which the foreign state should not interfere with. And when the Age of Consent Act was passed in 1891, the country was sharply divided on the issue. The agitation against the Age of Consent Bill brought into Indian nationalism, a new kind of militancy that was unseen before.

Another instance of the colonial legislative intervention is the Sati Abolition Act of 1829. Indeed the practice of sati engaged a great deal of attention of social reformers. Recent historical research has shown that the practice of sati was not a ubiquitous one and was in fact restricted to some parts and to some sections of the Indian society alone, particularly the upper caste Hindus. Ashis Nandy notes that by the beginning of the eighteenth century sati had become a rare occurrence. It is only by the end of the eighteenth century that we find instances of widespread sati. However, its gruesome nature attracted the attention of colonial critics and reformers alike. Sati came to be seen as one of the worst acts of barbarism and was condemned
heavily. Thus it is hardly surprising that despite its prevalence in a few regions only, the debate on *sati* came to occupy a central position in the colonial and the social reform discourse.

The debate over *sati* was initiated by the colonial officials and it primarily signified the concern for the status of women in the 19th century. Under colonialism India experienced transition from feudalism to capitalism. Colonialism held the promise of modernity and inspired a critical self-examination of indigenous society and culture. Colonialism initiated a 're-evaluation' of the Indian 'tradition' along the lines of the 'modern' economy and society, a result of the incorporation of India into the world capitalist system. Such a re-evaluation involved critiquing and reforming several social practices, *sati* being one of them.

Colonial deliberations on legislating against *sati* were initially stalled by the concern whether the practice had religious sanctions and whether such legislation would fetch indigenous opposition. Attempting to defend their self-defined role as bringers of enlightenment on the one hand, and to refrain from interfering in the religious affairs of the Hindus on the other, led the colonial government pass a series of early compromising laws. These laws distinguished between 'voluntary' and 'enforced' *sati*, granting
permission to the former. The reformers opposing sati were displeased because these laws legally allowed sati in some form (voluntary).

A name closely associated with the movement against sati is that of Raja Ram Mohun Roy. Before Roy however, the chief Pundit of the Supreme Court, Mrityunjaya Vidyalamkara in 1817 had announced that sati had no base in the Shastras. In 1818, one of the chief opponents of sati, William Bentinck who was the provincial governor of Bengal, prohibited sati in Bengal. It however took eleven years for this prohibition to extend to the rest of India. It happened in 1829, when Bentinck became the Governor General of India and passed the Sati Abolition Act. Though the enactment of this law saw protests from the Hindu orthodoxy, these protests were less than what had been actually anticipated.

As mentioned earlier sati was not a widespread practice as is generally believed. It was also not a continually existing one. The only instance where we find widespread sati is during Bentinck’s move to abolish it in Bengal. It could have been to emphasise the gravity of the problem or to reassert the ‘tradition’ by a community, which considered itself to be in a crisis. Even then, this practice was found mainly in upper classes/castes of Calcutta.
While arguing that ‘tradition’ was reconstituted under the colonial rule and that women and brahminic scriptures became the basis for this rearticulation, Lata Mani notes: “Women become emblematic of tradition, and the reworking of tradition is largely conducted through debating the rights and wrongs of women in society”.16 She observes that perhaps due to this intimate connection between women and tradition, the debates are not so much about women, as they are about what constitutes authentic cultural tradition. However while women became discursive sites for debating the authenticity of culture and tradition, Anshuman Mondal finds this a part of the process of ‘disembodiment’ of the woman and the redefinition of womanhood along lines of tradition. Thus the discourse on sati, says Mondal translated into a discourse on identity.17

The debate on sati saw a heavy reliance on scriptures and texts for its authentication. In this regard Mani opines: “This privileging of brahminic scriptures and the equation of tradition with scripture is an effect of a ‘colonial discourse’ on India”.18 This colonial discourse implies an understanding of the Indian society that emerged during and beside the colonial rule. According to Mani: “Official discourse on sati rested on three interlocking assumptions: the hegemony of religious texts, a total indigenous submission to their dictates, and the religious basis of sati. These three
assumptions shaped the nature and process of British intervention in outlawing the practice”.

Moreover the meaning of consent, in the case of a voluntary sati, was difficult to assess in the face of the existing patriarchies. Mani notes that in both conceding to and resisting sati, women do not appear as subjects but as ‘victims’ of religion. As Mani notes: “Despite the difficulty in ascertaining the meaning of ‘willing’ sati, given the absence of women’s voice and the historical and cultural variability of such terms as agency and subjecthood, it seems to me that the volition of some widows can justifiably be seen as equal to resistance of others”. Seen in this manner the official discourse ignores the possibility of women’s agency in the practice of sati.

It is interesting to note that both the officials and the indigenous male elite privileged scriptures over customs and overrode the latter in the light of the former. Roy too based his arguments against sati on Brahminical scriptures like the Vedas and Smritis. While dismissing sati however he refers to the ascetic widowhood that these scriptures recommend. The most important contribution of Roy in his discourse on social reform was the way in which he attempted to redefine ‘womanhood’ itself. He was aware that the structures that were being introduced in India by the colonial rule, if found
compatible with the existing traditions would bring in new concepts of political activism, political ethics and political power. These structures were distinctively associated with the definitions of masculinity and femininity. Sensing this, Roy delineated a model of reform in which the redefinition of womanhood would be the central focus. Thus, he not only linked sati to a faulty mode of worship, he also challenged the very basis of it, by “suggesting new sex role norms and sexual stereotypes” as Ashis Nandy comments.22

Analysing Roy, Nandy writes:

While men seemed to him ‘naturally so weak and prone to be led astray by temptations of temporary gratifications’, women seemed to him to have ‘firmness of mind, resolution, trustworthiness and virtue; they were ‘devoid of duplicity’ and capable of ‘leading the austere life of an ascetic’.23

Such a redefinition, according to Nandy had tremendous implications in the years to come. For more than a hundred years after Roy, movements centred on women’s socially disadvantaged position and means to improve it. In this way, Roy’s contribution in reinterpreting the traditional concepts of ‘male’ and ‘female’, the concept of womanhood and the traditional
relationship between male and female in a society can be assessed as a durable theory of social reform.  

Yet another instance of a legislative effort by the colonial government was the Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act of 1856, which sought to legitimise the remarriage of Hindu widows. The Act was the culmination of a long struggle by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in particular. Vidyasagar was grieved by the condition of widows and the hardships that were customary to a widow. Vidyasagar considered the evil custom of *kulinism* to be the basis of all other evils in society. Under this system, the males among Kulin Brahmins had exceptional privileges with regard to marriage. The Kulins were an aristocratic class with rigid marriage rules. The males were highly sought after as bridegrooms and had the right to marry any number if times. Neera Desai notes that this had many adverse consequences like secret female infanticide, ruin of the family due to polygamy and huge amount for dowry. *Kulinism* had become so prominent in Bengal that almost all reformers of Bengal wanted to put an end to this evil custom. Vidyasagar being a crusader for women’s rights could not evade it.  

The practice of *Kulinism* that was marked by child-marriage and polygamy resulted in young girls marrying elderly men, which caused them early
widowhood. Lucy Carroll notes that the problem of widows largely concerned the upper-castes among whom child-marriage was practiced and remarriage prohibited. She notes that the lower castes who formed around 80 percent of the Hindu population neither practiced child-marriage nor prohibited widow remarriages.26

The Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act provided for the remarriage of all Hindu widows, however forfeiting the inheritance from the dead husband in favour of other kin of the deceased. Carroll depicts how this Act was evoked to deny widows different kinds of property rights which customary law had allowed them previously.

She opines:

Hindu Law as administered by the British-Indian courts was a mixture of Shastric Law, custom and case-law, with a hardy dose of English legal concepts and notions, simplified and standardised for ease of application and administrative convenience. Not surprisingly, the end result contained several anomalies.27

Carroll demonstrates how the British attempt to assume judicial responsibility in India resulted in the depletion of customary law to be
replaced by a canon Hindu Law, which had its basis in the religious texts. There are two main reasons for the Hindu Law to be based in the texts, according to Carroll. Firstly, the judges of the British-Indian courts had a Brahminical view of the Indian society and were unaware of the customs and traditions of those lower down the social hierarchy. Secondly, it was easy and convenient to refer to the Hindu texts rather than going for empirical investigations of the customary laws that were numerous and varied. Moreover Carroll as observes:

Coupled with a strong disinclination to decide cases on the basis of custom at variance with Hindu Law was an equally strong inclination to integrate these multitudinous groupings into a less complicated (and more easily administered) system of law, into a single overarching legal code.\(^{28}\)

The main point of contention over the Act in effect was its implication on those castes, which allowed widow remarriage according to their pre-existing customs. Carroll concludes:

Few women of the upper castes availed themselves of their new right to remarry, while those widows who, in the exercise of their customary rights, remarried independently of the Act, found themselves now subject to the forfeiture clause of
section 2 [of the Act], regardless of their Customary Law which permitted a widow to remarry and certainly in many, if not most, cases permitted her also to retain property inherited from her first husband.29

The continued reference to Hindu scriptures for justifying their cause, both by the colonial rulers as well as by reformers, gave a new dimension to the question of justice for women. As the above discussions on the age of consent, sati and the remarriage of widows suggest, the woman/widow herself becomes marginal and the central concern is about authentic tradition. As Mani notes: “Instead women become sites upon which various versions of scripture/tradition/law are elaborated and contested”.30 For instance, the discourse on sati, which translated into the discourse on social reform and furthered as nationalism, “elaborated a complex symbolism around signs of femininity”.31 Mondal argues that this period witnessed “what may be called the dialectical process of (dis)embodiment whereby the material being of womanhood is transfigured into a sign for something else (disembodiment) but simultaneously involves the ascription of woman as an embodiment of that something, in this case of an identity”.32 This, Mondal calls the emblematics of gender in the nationalist discourse.
The discourse on social reform also depicts the denial of agency and subjectivity to women. Mani demonstrates how the colonial discourse on sati failed to include a discussion on the rights of women as individuals or take a note of a complex female subjectivity. The discourse is marked by the conspicuous absence of women's agency, which according to Mondal is the precise reason for the disembodiment of womanhood and its subsequent employment as a signifier of an identity.

He argues that the discourse on sati formed a base for the wider discourse on social reform, which later shaped the nationalist discourse. And during this process the disembodied womanhood became the embodiment of an identity, which was a cultural sign, a caste-community sign or a national sign. According to Mondal: "'Woman' is transfigured into a cultural sign rather than a material being with social and political needs".33 This is to say that in these discourses womanhood came to represent not women but a particular tradition, here the 'tradition' of a conquered people; womanhood became the sign of that tradition.

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colonial regime had undertaken. This codification mainly revolved around two parameters — caste and community. And it was along these two that the Indian identity was sought to be consolidated. Thus the discourse during this period, according to Mondal, concentrated on “the need to mark off a cultural space which corresponded to a nascent awareness of a ‘Hindu’ community... And it is in the process of marking off this new cultural space that womanhood was deployed as a sign of authenticity”.34

Reform in the nineteenth century thus revolved around improving the condition of women in the country. Early reformers wanted to help women but did not grant them equal status with men.35 However later reformers realised that social reform would not succeed until attempts were made to improve women’s status in society. But since many reformers were sceptical about reforms through legislations by colonial authorities, hence the changes that these reformers proposed could not adequately address the ‘woman question’ during this period.

Moreover according to Sangari and Vaid:

Social legislations were often counter-productive because it did not distinguish between the forms of patriarchy which were
cross caste and class and those which were specific to particular groups.36

Social legislation preserved its patriarchal biases and bases. For instance, despite the social awareness about the condition of widows, the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act failed to address the economic issues, which had been one of the main reasons for discouraging widow remarriage. Moreover it also worked to homogenise at a legal level, the disadvantages that an upper-caste Hindu widow had to incur on remarriage. Thus Sangari and Vaid note that social reforms did not aim at reforming the existing patriarchies, rather “they have been involved in re-aligning patriarchy with social stratification (both existing and emerging) and with changing political formations”37.

Social reform thus was limited in addressing the issue of gender justice within a highly patriarchal society. Nonetheless some endeavours like women’s educations or initiating formations of associations for women did prove to be empowering for some women in the long run.
3.3: Women’s Education and Women’s Associations

An important aspect of the social reform movements was the endeavours for the education of women. The education of women engaged the attention of many reformers of the early nineteenth century. Education of girls/women was discouraged at that time, backed by the popular myth that an educated or a literate girl would meet widowhood soon after marriage. Just like the Shudras (lowest caste of the varna system), females were also denied access to education. This was to ensure their subjugation and control over them. One of the important reasons to keep the women illiterate or uneducated was also to keep them ignorant about whatever little rights they possessed by customary or community laws.

The first schools for girls were started by the English and American missionaries in 1810s. However such schools attracted mainly lower class/ caste girls, who were often lured by gifts or clothing. It appears that as a result girls of upper class/ castes were deprived of education during this time. The colonial authorities gave moral and financial support to female education, but did not guarantee schools for girls. While male education was encouraged and enhanced, female education was not supported by the
Indian society either. An educated male could enhance the prestige of the family, but the same could not be said of the female.

The Indian social reformers considered the education of women as one of the means of achieving social and religious reforms. The demand for female education also increased because English/western educated males wanted educated wives. As the English education became popular many young men were enthusiastic about it. Such men did not want illiterate or uneducated brides. They wanted spouses who could share their ideas and thoughts. Hence such men, who were educated also promoted and supported female education in India. Moreover, reformers also felt that social reform was not possible unless both men and women were educated.

By the mid-nineteenth century, women’s education became a highly campaigned issue. A breakthrough was achieved in the field of female education when government schools were established which had the patronage of the reformist religious institutions. The Brahmo Samaj, the Prathana Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the Theosophical Society supported female education. While the missionary schools had mainly attracted girls from poor families, the opening of the Brahmo and Hindu schools gave a similar opportunity to upper caste girls. Through the ‘home education’
movement, adult women were also educated within the *yananas* (women's quarters).

The movement for women's education is generally associated with the need of the rising middle class who wanted its women to adapt themselves to the western culture. Moreover, the education of boys gave a new dimension to the public-private dichotomy. While the public sphere was continually being reformed by various 'modern' ideas and education, the home or the private 'represented the dead weight of traditions'. Therefore, it became necessary for the private to be reformed and brought into a complementary position with the new outside world.

Schools for women began opening in places such as Bengal, Madras, Jullundar, and Poona. The Theosophical Society led by Annie Besant was the chief source of encouragement to female education in Madras. In north India, female education was encouraged by the Arya Samaj, a reformist Hindu sect following the teachings of Swami Dayanand Saraswati. As the progressive Arya Samajists recognised the importance of involving women into their reform efforts, the Arya Kanya Pathshala was opened by the Jullundar Samaj in 1890. The principle of this school was a lady. In Poona schools for women were opened by the efforts of Pandita Ramabai.
Saraswati, who founded the Sharda Sadan in Bombay and Poona in 1889. The first school for widows was established in Poona in 1869 by D. K. Karve. Geraldine Forbes notes that these two schools along with the Mahakali Pathshala of Calcutta founded in 1893 by Mataji Tapaswini represented "efforts to build female schools distinct from those of the religious reform organisations...These three examples are especially worthy of attention because they highlight the involvement of women in structuring and defining female education".39

By the beginning of the twentieth century, a number of schools for women had been opened and the number of students of these schools had also greatly risen. While this elevation in female enrolment in schools unnerved the conservatives and the traditionalists, according to Forbes institution-builders like Karve asserted that "female education was the ideal method of smoothing over the rough spots in the transition from tradition to modernity".40

Though the system of education for women was extremely conservative, it had unexpected and unanticipated results. Forbes notes:

The first generation of educated women found a voice: they wrote about their lives and about the condition of women. The
second generation acted. They articulated the needs of women, critiqued their society and the foreign rulers, and developed their own institutions.41

Gradually women had begun realising that they had been discriminated against by being denied the right to education. As a result, even women from conservative households began learning (with the help, support and encouragement of some male member of the family). Girls began attending school in large numbers. Those who could not attend schools began their education at home. Educated women began educating others. It thus turned out to be a very dynamic process. In the early years of the twentieth century, women thus emerged as capable participants in the redefinition of their future.

A name worth noting here is that of Phule whose thinking has continued to guide many emancipatory efforts of the lower castes, including independent efforts by low-caste women. Analysing the bases of the exploitation of the lower castes, Phule emphasised that education was important to liberate the lower castes from their subordinated position. He staunchly believed that the failure to educate women was the primary cause of the impoverished
condition of Indian society. He opened his first school at Poona in 1848, which was meant for low-caste untouchable girls.

While one level of intervention of Phule was to educate low-caste women, the other focussed on alleviating the humiliating conditions of the Brahmana widows. This condition of the Brahmana widows suggested another aspect of the Brahmana patriarchy, the crusade against which formed the crux of Phule's reformist work. Nonetheless he asserted that the condition of the low-caste women was the worst. While the Brahmana women were subject to the control of men within their family, the low-caste women who laboured in the fields were subject to double control; from the men of their family and from Brahmana men whom they worked for. His acceptance of gender inequality even within the non-Brahmana activism led him to defend Tarabai Shinde's work against women's subordination. Phule's acceptance of Tarabai's stand led to an extremely important recognition that the non-Brahmana movement had neglected the need for gender analysis.

The movement for social reform had several important consequences on the lives of women. One of these consequences was the rise of many institutions/organisations for women. Most of these organisations came up
to serve the cause of the improving the condition of women in India in line with the main aim of the social reform movement.

Early organisations for women were established by men and sought to address injustice and malpractices against women. Later however, organisations were formed that directly involved women. Those women, who had been allowed education either by their fathers or husbands, took active part in such organisations. These organisations founded by women, according to Forbes, "became the medium for the expression of 'women's opinion'. At the same time they were a training ground for women who would later take up leadership roles in politics and social institutions. Those institutions, in turn, played an important role in the construction of the Indian Nation".44

The first organisations for women were initiated by men who belonged to the new cadre of socio-religious reformers. Among the earliest associations to be formed were the Gujarat Vernacular Society, Prarthana Samaj, Arya Mahila Samaj and the Bharat Mahila Parishad.

However on the one hand the reformers wanted to drape the linen of social reform in the fashion that they defined, and on the other, women began
realising that the colonial government also did not care about the real ‘emancipation’ of women. The British support to female education did not include matters that required granting autonomy to women. In the judgement of the much-publicised Rukhmabai case the British upheld the patriarchal customs and forced women to submit to it. This case made it clear to the Indian women that the colonial administration could not be relied upon for protection of women’s rights and guaranteeing justice to them.

Thus the need was felt by educated women to develop organisations/associations that were inspired and initiated by women; whose aims, activities and interests were female-defined. Several organisations founded by women came up at different places, wherein women themselves defined problems and proposed solutions. These associations had different names and though most of them were geographically limited, they had the common goal of bringing women together to discuss their issues and problems.

The major issues that these organisations emphasised were the same as had been previously raised by men. What gave these issues a new dimension was their being handled by women themselves. However, all these organisations
had geographical limitations, and after World War I, national women’s organisations were set up. Three such major women’s organisations were the Women’s Indian Association (WIA), the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and the All-India Women’s Conference (AIWC). The AIWC is considered the most important of the organisations formed during this time.

Despite the increase in the number of such organisations, they could not really extend their membership beyond the urban middle class. Forbes attributes both their successes and their failures to the ideological basis in social feminism that all these organisations had. They were not in favour of the term ‘feminism’, which was closely equated with men-hating and the suffragette violence. Yet they wanted greater autonomy for women. But a majority of them sought the amelioration of social evils so that women could carry out their social obligations. There were no real attempts at questioning the patriarchal nature of the society.

These women’s organisations did not adopt a radical ideology because they had grown with male-support and “flourished in partnership with male-dominated nationalist parties”. The image of a woman as constructed prior to and during the nationalist struggle was as nurturing and self-sacrificing.
Thus the needs of women could not be put first. However Samita Sen notes that by 1940s the hegemony that these organisations claimed began declining, as the movement to free the nation from colonial rule gripped the masses including women.

Several processes were simultaneously at work during this period. On the one hand the social reform movement and revivalism reconstructed the myth of the golden past of India. On the other the nationalist movement was emerging fast and the activities of the IWM were progressing through organisations like the WIA and the AIWC. In this sense the national movement too had a specific impact on the IWM. In the following section I shall examine the impact of the nationalist movement on the IWM.

3.4: Women and the Nationalist Movement

In the beginning only educated women from liberal homes took active part in politics. Later however many other women who were not educated or who came from conservative families also joined in the struggle. While the legacy of social reform like education or women’s welfare impressed the progressive women, the movement to free the country from foreign domination attracted the entire mass of them. Forbes presents an excellent
analysis of how the participation of women in the national struggle acted as a fertile ground for the rise of feminist consciousness in India. She writes:

The story of women's role in the nationalist struggle is not simply one of marionettes who were told when to march and where to picket ... The nature of their work influenced how women saw themselves and how others saw their potential contribution to national development. At the same time their involvement helped to shape women's views of themselves and of their mission.47

From its very inception the membership of the Indian National Congress was open to women. Such encouragement resulted in ten women attending the fourth session of the Congress. These women who included Swarnakumari Devi (sister of Rabindranath Tagore), Pandita Ramabai, Mrs. Kashbai Kanitkar and Mrs. Manekjee Cursetjee, emerged as famous educationists and social reformers. Later Kadambini Ganguly became the first woman to speak from the Congress platform, when she attended the congress session of 1890.

In 1905 when the British partitioned the province of Bengal, women joined men in opposing this partition. The partition sparked off the Swadeshi
movement wherein people boycotted goods made in England and vowed to sell and buy only those goods, which were made in Bengal. This *Swadeshi* movement in Bengal reflected the beginning of women's participation in nationalist activities on a large scale. Protest meetings were held by women and around five hundred women watched the laying of the foundation stone of the Federation Hall at Calcutta on 16 October 1905. Women organised *Swadeshi melas* and pledged to give up the use of foreign goods.

However women's participation in the movement was limited in the sense that there were no women leaders during this time. Women helped in circulating revolutionary leaflets and literature and in maintaining a liaison between different revolutionary leaders.

The entry of Mrs. Annie Besant accentuated women's association with, and active participation in the freedom struggle. A member of the Theosophical Society, Besant joined the Congress in 1914. In 1916 she co-founded the Home Rule Movement with Tilak. During the course of the Home Rule agitation women began to realise their exclusion from the political movement. Besant strongly argued that the progress of India was impossible without the emancipation of women. She became the first president of the Indian Women's Association founded in 1917, through which she put
forward the demand for political rights for women. Her arrest on the basis of protests from all over the country and also from abroad. After her release, she became the first woman to be elected President of the Indian National Congress. Under her influence the Congress expressed that men and women should have equal rights with regard to franchise and eligibility for all elective bodies.

Another important woman to appear on the national scene was Sarojini Naidu. In addition to being a famous poetess and a good orator, Naidu was also a famous national figure. She was the first Indian woman to make politics her full-time occupation. She turned a nationalist and a supporter of women’s rights while working with the Congress, the Muslim League and the Indian Social Conference. During the 1917 Calcutta session of the Congress, she underscored the ‘sustenance’ that women could give to the nationalist movement.

At around this time, there also began the movement for women’s rights. In 1917, Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montague planned a tour of India along with the Viceroy, Lord Chlemsford. Montague was given the charge of introducing certain post-war reforms and measures to include more Indians in the governing process. The women leaders of the WIA decided to
grab this opportunity to demand voting rights for the Indian women. Thus a
deputation including fourteen prominent Indian women led by Naidu was
nominated to meet Mr. Montague and Lord Chlemsford. Forbes notes that
with this deputation, Indian women began their struggle for securing
political and civil rights.

In December 1917 this deputation met Mr. Montague to demand voting
rights for Indian women. However these women who were educated and
elite claimed to represent all women of the country. The British did not
accept this claim and alleged that the ‘middle-class Indian society’ did not
acknowledge the customs and traditions of rural masses. Hence instead of
welcoming their petitions, the British criticised them for ignoring the masses
of Indian women. Thus the Joint Select Committee, which was set up to
decide giving rights to Indian women, ignored the suggestions and demands
of women to be granted the right to vote. In this connection, Besant warned
the Committee that it was making a mistake by ignoring women’s demands.
As Forbes notes:

According to Besant, Indian political councils included women
until the British imposed the notions of women’s proper place.
If the British continued to exclude them, Besant predicted
Indian women would join political protests. This would have
serious consequences. Any attempts to suppress their agitation would fail because Indian men 'would not tolerate police interference where women are concerned'. Besant was raising the spectre of a revolt from within the zenana, a dangerous space because it was unexplored and uncolonised.48

In 1918 at a special session of the Congress held at Bombay, Naidu persuaded the members to support the demand for franchise for Indian women. Her persuading speech resulted in the resolution being passed by a 75 percent majority. The Home Rule League, under Besant also vigorously demanded the vote for women. However, when the Government of India Act was published in 1919, women were disheartened to find no provision for women enfranchisement. The women activists felt that excluding women from the India Act was a “de facto recognition of male authority over women”.

The Act extended the communal franchise to include Sikhs, Europeans, Anglo-Indians and Christians in addition to Muslims (who were granted this advantage as a result of the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909). This was done under the pretext of protecting or safeguarding minority rights. This minority however, meant only male minority. On the other hand, a majority
of women were denied voting rights, because the minority lived in seclusion. The *purdah* was used as a weapon against granting rights to women. The women demanded why the British could not grant vote to women, while making provisions for safeguarding the rights of the 'purdahnasheen'.

While the Government of India Act of 1919 did not directly enfranchise women, it empowered the Provincial Legislatures to “remove sex barrier at their discretion”. Since granting of vote to women, according to the British would be mean interfering into the social customs and religious life of the Indians, the decisions could be left to Indian “in accordance with the constitutionally expressed views of the Indians themselves”.

The Provincial Legislatures welcomed this provision and immediately passed resolutions to extend voting rights to women. Such resolutions were passed in Madras and Bombay in 1921, in United Provinces in 1923, Central Province, Bengal and Punjab in 1926. This promptness of the provincial bodies discredited the Southborough Committee, which had declared in its report of April 1919 that none of the local bodies desired the enfranchisement of women.
The movement for women’s rights however, received grim response from the national front. While some national leaders while Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu supported this movement of women and also participated in it, most other leaders felt that priority for the country was the attainment of nationhood. The gaining of Independence would subsequently grant more rights to women. Quoting Madame Cama, Forbes writes: “When India is independent women will not only get the vote, but all other rights.” However, Kumar also notes that though the role of women in the national struggle was emphasised, both Besant and Naidu took the caution of describing this role as supplementary rather than leading. This could have been a means to ensure that women’s activism was accepted, by making it appear unthreatening.

The IWM progressed simultaneously with the nationalist movement in the form of campaigns for women’s rights and through organisations like the AIWC and the WIA. Everett identifies two ideals adopted by the IWM for improving the position of women in India. One was the goal of women’s uplift, which was to be achieved by social reform so that women could play an important and constructive social role. The other was the goal of equal rights for men and women, which implied extending to women those civil rights that men had enjoyed in the political, economic and familial spheres.
However both these ideals were linked to women’s contribution to national development.

The women’s uplift ideal argued that expanding and strengthening female roles in society would contribute potentially to national development. This conception argued that women’s role in development necessarily depended on female roles and qualities. Thus when oppressive social practices are changed and women are educated, they can perform their roles in an ‘enlightened’ manner, while these female values can also have an impact on the society. Two important propagators of the uplift argument were Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu, both of whom used the reformist/revivalist argument of the golden Vedic age in order to legitimise women’s political participation.

The equal rights conception argued that women’s contribution to national development required the realisation of their full capacities. Thus it was important to remove the barriers, which were in the form of social and legal inequalities. Removing these barriers would mean that not only women but also other oppressed and subjugated groups could perform roles that were restricted to the educated urban elite. Everett notes that women leaders who supported the equal rights conception argued that the economic, political
and the familial roles that women performed were crucial to development. Thus for national development it was important to change and reform the legal status of women in the economic, political and familial spheres.

These two goals are clearly reflected in the working of the AIWC. Having analysed the speeches of the AIWC presidents in two phases 1927-1931 and 1932-1951, Everett maps a shift from the goal of women’s movement from women’s uplift in the former phase to equal rights in the latter when the movement developed a liberal feminist orientation in the 1930s.

While the women’s movement grew with organisations like the AIWC taking the women’s cause to the national platforms, Partha Chatterjee notes that with the emergence of nationalism “questions regarding the position of women did not arouse the same degree of public passion and acrimony as they did only a few decades before. The overwhelming issues now are directly political ones – concerning the politics of nationalism”.53

Chatterjee argues that nationalism sought to resolve the woman’s question by identifying a potential difference between indigenous tradition and the perceived norms of western cultural modernity. Using this difference it sought to answer the new social and cultural problems of women.
Nationalism not only utilised the reformist and revivalist construction of an 'Indian tradition' but also extended it further. It used this construction to identify a difference with the west and employed this difference significantly to define other dichotomies. This was the difference between the material and the spiritual domains.

Nationalism separated the domain of culture into two spheres – material and spiritual, connecting the former to the west and the latter to India. The west had superiority in the material sphere, due to which they were able to subjugate and dominate others. Hence to counter colonialism it was important to learn and adopt within the indigenous culture, the superior techniques of the west. This was one reason for nationalism's emphasis on rationalism and on reforming Indian tradition. However a complete adaptation of the western culture would mean a threat to the 'self-identity of national culture'. For reasserting this self-identity the nationalist leaders argued for a recognition of spiritual superiority of the east over the west. Chatterjee observes:

This completed the formulation of the nationalist project, and as an ideological justification for the selective appropriation of western modernity, it continues to hold sway to this day.54
The nationalist discourse extended this dichotomy to a more profound one, that between the inner and the outer. The material aspect concerns the outside world, the ‘external’, while the spiritual concerns the inner self, that which lies within. If the inner self is strong and capable, we can adjust and make necessary compromises with the outside world. This way India would also retain its cultural distinctiveness.

This inner/outer distinction separated the social space into ghar and babir, the home and the outside world. Chatterjee defines: “The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one’s inner spiritual self, one’s true identity”. While the world is the terrain for material pursuit and is the domain of the male, the home essentially remains unaffected, is pure and is the domain of the female. Thus with the separation of the social space into ghar and babir, there began an identification of social roles by gender. This indeed was the conception of gender roles as reflected in traditional patriarchy but it was given new significance by the nationalist project. Nationalism argued that while the Europeans had succeeded in colonising the outer space, the home or the inner space was uncolonised, and this inner space represented the distinctiveness of the east. The new meaning given to the home/world
dichotomy and to gender roles became the ideological framework for resolving the women's question.

The changing social and economic conditions impelled a change in family life. The nationalist framework provided an ease with which the family life could be organised and right conduct for women in the changing world could be defined. The emphasis was on retaining the inner spirituality. As Chatterjee observes: "The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women [were entrusted with] the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality." The new role that a woman had to perform in the light of a changing world subjected her to a new form of patriarchy. The social conditions within which the dichotomy of the home/world was explored defined the new womanhood not only in contrast to the western society, but also as different from 'the patriarchy of indigenous tradition'. While nationalism did adopt some features of this indigenous tradition to retain a distinctive cultural identity, Chatterjee notes that this was now a "classicised tradition' - reformed, reconstructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality".

The new patriarchy so formed then defined the new woman as distinct from not only the westernised woman, but also the 'common' woman who was
marked by a host of lowly characteristics. This was the construction of the bhadramahila, who could, through education, attain cultural refinement without jeopardising her place within the home. It thus provided a domain within which the woman could be an autonomous subject; this domain was the private sphere. Education became a requisite for the bhadramahila, but she would not use this education to compete with men in the outside world and lose her feminine/spiritual virtues.

Such an identification of the spiritual with the feminine gave a new dimension to the definition of 'femininity'. Through education the woman could acquire the necessary qualities that were essential for running the household according to the conditions set by the outside world. For this she was also allowed to venture outside as long as she maintained her femininity. According to Chatterjee this “made possible the displacement of the boundaries of the home from the physical confines earlier defined by the rules of purdah to a more flexible, but nonetheless culturally determinate, domain set by the differences between socially approved male and female conduct”.

Once femininity was fixed in terms of culturally visible spiritual qualities, it was possible to go outside the home, even take up employment. This
‘spiritually loaded femininity’ also worked at erasing the sexuality of a woman in the world outside the home. The propagation of the woman as a goddess or mother also served the same purpose. This formed a terrain of major distinction between the Indian and the western woman.

The nationalist construction of ‘woman’ and ‘womanhood’ on the basis of the spiritual/material, inner/outer and home/world dichotomies had a very specific implication on the question of women’s emancipation. The question itself seemed to disappear from the public agenda of nationalism. The reason for this according to Chatterjee is that nationalism refused to make the “woman’s question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state”. Chatterjee notes: “The battle for the new idea of womanhood in the era of nationalism was waged in the home... it was the home that became the principal site of the struggle though which the hegemonic construct of the new nationalist patriarchy had to be normalised”. Moreover the changes that took place in the lives of middle-class women in the colonial period were “mostly outside the arena of political agitation, a domain where the nation thought of itself as already free.

After Independence and with the acquisition of national sovereignty the issues of legislative reforms in marriage, property rights for women and
gender equality were renewed in national political debate. Thus the post-
Independence period has witnessed the resurgence of the woman’s question
as an issue in national politics.

However the idea of the disembodied womanhood that I have discussed
earlier was furthered by the nationalist discourse. The bodies of women
became the discursive terrain on which the dichotomies of the \textit{ghar/bahir}
and the inner/outer were defined. The icon of an ideal womanhood that
was used to signify a culture or a tradition was now employed to signify a
new nation. The ‘Hindu’ cultural space that emerged during the social
reform discourse was now being transformed into a national community.
Mondal notes how India began to be defined not in terms of territory but in
terms of the religious communities that constituted it. The idea of a
composite nationhood began to grip the movement, and in this discourse
womanhood became a sign of ‘Indian’ identity.\textsuperscript{61}

While the nationalist discourse articulated this redefinition and reassertion of
feminine and spiritual virtues, the emergence of Gandhi saw the emphasis
on the superiority of these feminine virtues of purity, self-sacrifice and self-
suffering. As I shall discuss in the next section this meant transcending the
dichotomy between the public and the private. Gandhi not only brought the
conduct and the values associated with the private sphere into the public but also made them potential instruments of negotiation in the public sphere.

3.5: Gandhi and the Women's Movement

The most visible and noted impact of Gandhian leadership of nationalist struggle was the unprecedented participation of women in the struggle for Independence. While he gave a new direction, strength and inspiration to the freedom movement, he was also able to attract a large number of women to join the struggle. This could be accredited to his idea of non-violence and passive resistance, which was central to his thought. According to him, such passive resistance required strong moral capacities, which are inherent in women.

To understand how Gandhi was successful in attracting women to become useful instruments in mass struggle, it is important to understand his ideology behind the movement as well as his ideas on women and womanhood, which parted in some ways from those of the reformers of the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century reformers "tended to see women as passive recipients of more humane treatment through the
initiative of enlightened male effort”. Gandhi symbolises a crucial break from this attitude. According to Madhu Kishwar:

Gandhi saw women not as objects of reform and humanitarianism but as self-conscious subjects who could, if they choose, become arbiters of their own destiny.62

While the reformers wanted to ensure better conditions for women through social legislations, Gandhi strongly believed that the “rules of social conduct had to be framed by ‘mutual cooperation and consultation’ not forcibly imposed on women from outside”.63 He argued that since social legislation had been worked out by men, they had relegated women to a subordinate position, by being unfair and discriminatory.

Moreover early reformers relied on sacred scriptures and religious texts for finding bases for certain practices. Gandhi held that since religious texts were works by men, their dictates could not bring justice to women. If women were to have justice, “scriptures needed to be revised and all religious texts biased against the rights and dignity of women should be expurgated”.64 For this purpose, women needed to be like Sita, Draupadi and Damayanti, “pure, firm and self-controlled”.

165
Gandhi’s views on women revolved around these three icons of Indian womanhood and he constantly referred to them in his speeches and writings. By referring to the three ideals of Sita, Draupadi and Damayanti, he sought to equip the Indian women with moral courage and qualities that he associated with them. According to him, these ideals represented not just great moral courage but also ‘robust Independence’ as in the case of Draupadi. In his opinion Hinduism allowed absolute freedom to men and women for self-realisation, for which every individual is born.

Thus, on the one hand, Gandhi successfully attracted a large number of women into the freedom struggle by encouraging them to display their moral courage. On the other hand, he also made sure that the family allowed their women enough freedom to join the movement. As Sucheta Kriplani once reminisced:

Gandhi’s personality was such that it inspired the confidence not only in women but also in guardians of women, their husbands, fathers, brothers. Since his moral stature was high when women came out and worked in the political field, their family members knew that they were quite secure, they were protected.65
Drawing from the then existing ideas on women and womanhood, Gandhi attempted to reconstruct womanhood. This process of reformulation was mediated by caste, class and religious ideologies. The ideologies presented a set of legitimisers that defined femininity and womanhood. Thus we find in Gandhi's thought a continuity of the ideal of womanhood that was constructed by the social reform discourse. Sujata Patel observes: "His construct is drawn from a space inhabited by an urbanised middle-class upper caste Hindu male's perception of what a woman should be".66

Thus Gandhi extended the idea of a morally superior ideal woman that the early nationalist discourse had constructed. Patel notes that this was a way in which patriarchy was being realigned in the light of the changing social, economic and political conditions of the nation. However Gandhi departed from this discourse in that he redefined politics to find space within the home. Thus while he considered woman "the repository of all that is morally and spiritually good within the home", he legitimised this space by giving "this woman-in-the-home a specific space in his political ideology".67 Gandhi accorded to woman more power within the home and made the domestic sphere a potential politically significant space. According to Mondal this allowed "women to become significant political actors without
threatening the sanctioned spaces of Hindu patriarchy". As Madhu Kishwar opines:

He saw woman as a potential force in the struggle to build a new social order. He consciously attempted to articulate connections between private and public life in order to bring women into the struggle.

Gandhi first experienced ‘woman-power’ during the Satyagraha in South Africa. During this struggle he realised that women could become leaders in Satyagraha because according to him, Satyagraha does not require “the learning that books give but does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith”.

Gandhi was quick to build upon this idea of women as sufferers. In the words of Pratibha Jain: “[Gandhi] brought women’s suffering from the private realms of the family and household to public sphere wherein their capacity to suffer was transformed into shakti for breaking the chains of enslavement to colonial rule as well as their own enslavement as women”. He gave the suffering of women a new dimension when he interpreted this suffering not as a symbol of weakness and inferiority, but as related to endurance, courage, strength and fearlessness.
Gandhi's idea of suffering is directly related to his moral-political conceptions of Swaraj and Satyagraha. Swaraj for Gandhi meant more than mere political freedom.\textsuperscript{72} Satyagraha meant truth-force, soul-force that has also been called passive resistance. The two ideas that are central to his moral-political philosophy are truth and non-violence.\textsuperscript{73} Upon these two values, he built the edifice of his philosophy. An insight into these two values helps us understand how Gandhi was able to not only accommodate women in his idea of Satyagraha but also allowed them the place of the vanguard. Thus it was not a matter of chance but a deliberate and conscious effort by Gandhi to involve women in the movement.

Gandhi successfully employed suffering as a method of protest in non-violent Satyagraha. According to Gandhi, such a method of protest would leave a deep impact on the adversaries, who could be the British rulers, high-caste Hindus, liquor traders or foreign cloth merchants. An important aspect of this means of protest was Gandhi's emphasis on love or 'non-hatred' towards the opponents. This would ultimately lead to transformation of the opponents' hearts. Hence women, who have experienced suffering in the household, could deploy such means of protest with ease. As Jain writes:

"Gandhi's ideology of suffering transcended the domains of spirituality and individual salvation and encompassed the"
pursuit of justice in the social and political realms... He did not visualise suffering as an individual activity striving for personal deliverance but he evolved a collective style of suffering for attainment of larger goals – both social and political.\textsuperscript{74}

Gandhi linked the public and the private spheres when he asserted that such non-violent suffering as a means of protest could not only help in gaining freedom from foreign domination, it could be used as a tool for women's emancipation. Women could use it as a means in their own struggle against patriarchy. Therefore Gandhi chose certain activities in \textit{Satyagraha} where women could play a pivotal role. Such activities included \textit{swadeshi}, picketing, opposing untouchability, and elimination of communal violence. The first two involved active participation by entering the so-called public sphere. On the other hand, the latter two could be achieved only by operating from within the family, and as a part of the household. He thus suggested the use of non-violent \textit{Satyagraha} for both political Independence as well as social reform.

The salt \textit{Satyagraha} and \textit{swadeshi} movements saw huge participation of women. Gandhi’s propaganda favouring \textit{charkha} and \textit{kabdi} had a tremendous
impact as it fostered a spirit of nationalism and freedom in every home.

According to Kishwar:

This was a very remarkable way of reaching out to women and bridging the gap between their private lives and the economic-political life of the country.”

Gandhi deployed the spinning wheel as a symbol of self-reliance and linked it to the general uplift of the country. This was a strategy not only to encourage participation of women but also to ensure that the terrain of the movement was not shifted from the household. The fight for swadeshi and the urge to take up spinning at home had two specific implications according to Patel. Firstly Gandhi redefined political participation by bringing the national movement within the household. Secondly he reasserted the woman’s autonomy within the home. Thus on the one hand he gave a new interpretation to the woman’s role within the household and on the other he asserted her significance in the political world. The massive participation of women was also due to the fact that without challenging their traditional role in society Gandhi was instrumental in making women an important social base for the nationalist movement.
However an important concern that Gandhi’s programme for women’s emancipation overlooked was their economic dependence on men. Thus the necessity for independent control over economic resources was not integrated into women’s struggle. Kishwar comments: “Gandhi cannot be said to have evolved a concrete programme to tackle one of the basic causes of women’s powerlessness – their total economic dependence and lack of control over the resources of the family”.77 This resulted into only lip service being paid to the cause of women in the Gandhian era, while the condition of women remained backward and oppressed and in many cases even deteriorated than before.

He overlooked the material condition of women that reinforce their dependence on and subordination to men. Kishwar notes:

    Even though he was aware that among other things, oppression is not an abstract moral condition, but a social and historical experience related to production relations, he tried to change women’s position without transforming their relation to either the outer world of production or the inner world of family, sexuality and reproduction.78
Gandhi was also supportive of the traditional division of labour within the family. He reasserted that the household was the woman's domain while the main breadwinner of the family was the man. A woman could support her husband in this job but it would strictly be a subordinate role. He strongly opposed a woman's working for wages or participating in commercial activity outside the home. He justified such a 'harmonious division' of labour between the sexes on the grounds that since nature has made them different it is only proper that they perform different functions. Gandhi argued that the daily chores of the household and the care of children was enough to exhaust the energies of a woman. It would thus be unjust to let an additional burden of earning fall on her shoulders. However, in my opinion he completely overlooked the fact that working for wages outside the home, would give her economic independence. Such economic independence would allow her more autonomy within the family than anyone could voluntarily confer on her.

Kishwar notes that Gandhi helped the entry of women into public life without facing major oppositions from the men. She says: "The way their participation in these initial years was patronised by Gandhi set a trend for sponsored, patronised participation of urban, middle class women in the political life of the country".

173
Hence, as Kishwar comments:

Women’s entry into social and political life came not only without sufficient pressure from below, but was also characterised by a marked absence of the kind of hostility from men that women’s movements in some other parts of the world had to face. This perhaps accounts for the lack of sufficient militancy in the women’s movement on women’s issue in India, and the fact that the movement constantly tried to accommodate its demands within a male dominated power structure.  

This trend carried itself to the women’s movement in post-Independence. The culture of ‘benevolent patronage’ that the nationalist period cultivated characterises women’s politics in contemporary times. Paradoxically, Gandhi had warned women against depending on patronage. For this reason, he did not favour reservation for women. Gandhi wanted women to enter the public sphere in the form of selfless social workers. Being aware of the power-grabbing inclinations of men, he wanted women to selflessly undertake the task of social reconstruction.
While Gandhi's success in mobilising women in practical politics is noteworthy, it is also important to take note of how the moral-political nature of Gandhian thought played an important role in rethinking freedom, justice and emancipation. The centrality of truth and non-violence to this thought and the importance he gave to self-suffering and self-sacrifice suggested a revision in the public/private dichotomy. Another way in which he transcended this dichotomy was by linking rights and responsibilities. As Ronald Terchek notes:

The rights he [Gandhi] has in mind are not exhausted with the usual list of liberal rights but he speaks of the rights of individuals to meet their basic needs in dignity. Gandhi also departs from standard expressions of rights when he holds that freedom should not be taken to mean that individuals should be left alone to make their way in the world. Rather, he wants them to have the freedom to cultivate the love and service he believes characterises the best feature of human nature.82

Thus while he works on the terrain of universal morality and equal human dignity, he reasserts the importance of values such as love, truth and affection in the realisation of these universal principles. Justice according to him includes affection. His idea of sarvodaya is the culmination of this
thought. According to him a just society would be the one in which there exists no discrimination, oppression or exclusion of some groups. As I have discussed above, Gandhi did not bring about any radical transformation of the existing patriarchies. Nonetheless, Gandhi did provide a gender-sensitive perspective to some mainstream notions as mentioned above.

3.6: Some concluding Observations

This period of Indian history had a special impact on the women’s movement. Not only did it raise issues of discrimination against women, and to an extent addressed them, but also provided women an entry into the public-political sphere of activity. Moreover the constructions of womanhood that took shape during this period continued to guide the consciousness of Indians after Independence also.

To discuss the impact of the social reform and the nationalist movement on the IWM in isolation would be flawed because the nationalist movement carried forward the constructions of the social reform movement. In this section I discuss how the movements for social reform and freedom worked at redefining ‘woman’ and ‘womanhood’, the legacy of which is found in contemporary India.
A process that had a major significance on almost all aspects of life during this period was the rise of the middle-class. This emergence of the middle-class gave rise to a new familial ideology and led to a realignment of patriarchal structures. The idea of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Indian’ womanhood found shape in this class. Such a concept of womanhood departed not only from the prevalent norms of womanhood existing then but also from the way in which ‘western’ woman was defined. These notions were constructed and made popular through colonialist and nationalist discourse.

This redefinition took shape around the idea of an Aryan woman, traced back to the Aryan period, or the ‘golden period’ of India’s past. The appeal to the ancient and medieval Vedic period as a golden age and the construction of womanhood through it was a deliberate attempt to counter the colonialist criticisms that the Indian tradition treated its women shabbily. It was an attempt to assert indigenous moral superiority over the rulers. As Uma Chakravarti notes:

The degeneration of Hindu civilisation and the abject position of Hindu women, requiring the ‘protection’ and ‘intervention’ of the colonial state were the two main aspects of colonial politics.83
Thus there were attempts to point out India's golden past, primarily the Aryan golden age, wherein "men were free, brave, vigorous, fearless, themselves civilised and civilising others, noble, and deeply spiritual; and the women were learned, free, and highly cultured; conjointly they offer sacrifices to gods ... and preferring spiritual upliftment to the pursuit of mere riches. Additionally they represented the best examples of conjugal love, offering the supreme sacrifice of their lives as a demonstration of their feeling for their partners in the brief journey of life. This was to be an enduring legacy". This discourse generated aggressive cultural nationalism, which valorised Aryan and Kshtriya values. Vigour and militancy were central to such an identity. However, the selective nature of this process resulted in the exclusion of non-Aryan or un-Aryan elements.

Two important reformers, Phule and Pandita Ramabai, departed from this idea of the golden past, and indeed rejected it completely. While most reformers (and revivalists) identified the Aryan period as the golden age of India, Phule condemned this period for having conquered and subordinated the indigenous people and usurping their land and power. This critique was a part of Phule analysis of the roots of caste inequality in India. According to him, the Aryan conquest gave rise to the caste system and caste-based inequality set in. On the other hand, Ramabai argued that there never was a
golden age for Hindu women. She argued that the Aryan woman, whose image was constructed during the social reform and nationalist movements, never existed.

Chakravarti notes that in the light of the newly emerging social, economic and cultural context of the colonial period, it was difficult to construct a single model for regeneration of women. For the males this model was provided by the reassertion of the brave and free Aryan male and thus rejecting the conception of the effeminate male that the colonial critics had used to condemn the Indian males. Chakravarti notes: “The kind of woman required for the present and the future was much more difficult to construct, given the need for a different kind of regeneration that was necessary in her case”. Thus most writers of the time resorted to the image of the “Vedic woman as the highest symbol of Hindu womanhood”. Moreover the complementary role of the woman on the lines of the ‘Vedic helpmate’ was used extensively by the nationalist discourse to extend complementary roles to women.

Such complementary role of women was propagated by the IWM too in its initial phase. Everett notes: “The movement’s acceptance of complementary sex roles lessened male opposition, but it also made it difficult for the
movement [during its later stages] to attack the division of labour on the basis of sex and to put forward a more flexible concept of sex roles”.

Everett argues that the IWM was obliged to conform to the idea of serving the family first and then the community. This, she thinks, is a reason for the IWM to be restricted to the upper and middle women, since only those with sufficient number of servants could manage both.

Moreover during its early years, the IWM did not aim for a radical challenge in the various existing patriarchal practices. The experiences of social reformers had depicted that it was relatively easy to aim at ‘reforms’ by referring to the sanctions by religion. Hence the women leaders also utilised the concept of an idealised Indian womanhood to encourage female education and enhance political participation. However while using religious ground to legitimise their entry into the political realm, women later found it difficult to challenge the very patriarchal bases of religion and the caste system.

Everett also notes that the social hostility that the social reformers had to encounter impelled the women’s rights activists to downplay their demand for rights and instead associate their political participation with nationalist and religious causes. In the absence of substantive social reforms however,
only a minority of women were able of participate in the women’s movement.

With the emergence of the nationalist movement, different versions of female emancipation came to be associated with national liberation and regeneration. The concept of Aryan woman, though an elitist one, came to dominate the middle-class consciousness. Sangari and Vaid note:

The formation of desired notions of spirituality and of womanhood is thus part of the formation of the middle-class itself, wherein hierarchies and patriarchies are sought to be maintained on both the material and spiritual ground.89

As discussed in section four, the distinction between the material and the spiritual that was identified with the western and the Indian cultures respectively, and also worked at a redefinition of the public and the private spheres for women.

While the private sphere came to be defined as distinct from and an alternative to the materialism of the west, the reconstruction of the public sphere also took place around the spiritual/material dichotomy. For the middle-class women this meant carrying the conditions of the newly redefined private sphere into their workplace, or the public sphere.

181
According to Sangari and Vaid: “For the poor women it signaled a partial shift from the traditional ‘public’ sphere of agriculture labour into the modern industrialised sector, and also a steady marginalisation from both traditional activity and the modern industrial sector and hence from the productive process”.

Thus on the one hand the middle-class women had to conform to the new norms of the ‘*bhadralok*’; on the other carry its morality into the public sphere of work. In some cases the poor women began cottage industries in the private sphere, wherein their public labour came to be recognised as an extension of their private household work. According to Sangari and Vaid this led to new and severe economic and patriarchal oppression. As they note:

So not only do the familial ideologies of the middle-class mediate in different ways the entry of women into the labour market and the economic sphere, they also become a constricting force which has often ensured that political or economic participation of women will not mean or be equal to a wider emancipation.

An interesting aspect of this construction was that the issues taken up by the reform movements hardly concerned the cultural forms of the lower strata.
of society. But by negotiating the areas that were explored by social reform movements these lower sections of society sought to culturally identify themselves with the emergent middle-class.

The social reform and nationalist movements defined and differentiated public and private spheres on the basis of the home/world and inner/outer dichotomies. This implied a distinction between the values/virtues that came to be associated with each sphere. As Chatterjee notes the virtues of spirituality and purity became synonymous with femininity and women were expected to uphold these virtues both in public and private spheres.

As discussed above, Gandhi also worked on the premise of the spiritual qualities of women. From a feminist perspective Gandhi's view of women as sufferers can be seen as a 'legacy of the dominant cultural patriarchal ideal of feminine identity'. However, what makes Gandhi's thought different from the dominant patriarchal one is that he wanted all humans, men and women, to live a life of self-sacrifice and suffering. Since women have already been experiencing suffering, they could lead the way, inspiring men to follow them. According to him, such self-sacrifice and suffering was necessary for the purification of social life at large.
Ashis Nandy notes that by emphasising the superiority of feminine virtues and by bringing them into the political space, "Gandhi was trying to fight colonialism by fighting the psychological equation which a patriarchy makes between masculinity and aggressive social dominance and between femininity and subjugation". In doing so, he was working towards a rediscovery of womanhood as a civilising force in human society. According to Thomas Pantham, Gandhi's Satyagraha is the extension of 'law of love' that exists within the family, to the sphere of politics. In a similar vein, Forbes notes that Gandhi constructed a new ideal for Indian woman that rewrote passitivity and self-suffering as a strength. Patel also notes that the values of courage, purity, patience and suffering were given a new significance and placed superior to the attributes that define males.

One of the most important features of Gandhian thought is the importance it gives to dialogue. According to Gandhi dialogue is especially important in societies with diversities. With differences in background, resources, occupation and power, it is difficult to understand the others' position. Under such circumstances it is shared experience that helps us gain an understanding of the concerns and needs of others and these "shared experiences will open dialogue as a potential corrective". Such dialogue provides space for the negotiation for differences and diminishes disparities
in a society. Thus the contribution of Gandhi lies not only in the fact that his leadership facilitated women’s massive participation in the public sphere for the first time in the history of the freedom struggle, but also in that his thought provided a potential alternative to the dominant western thought. This is one reason why Gandhi’s thought is considered capable of being the philosophical base for many theories of emancipation.

As is evident from the discussion in this chapter, the women’s movement during pre-Independence represents a phase of transition for the Indian women. The challenge posed to many oppressive customs and practices as well as the encouragement to women’s education marked a definite move towards gender justice. The consciousness-raising efforts, that are also characteristic of the contemporary IWM, provided newer basis for participation by women in activities outside their homes. The rise of female leadership is one of the evidences of this change. On the theoretical front, the public/private distinction was being reformulated and reinforced by different means, wherein the subordinate and supplementary role of women was continually being re-emphasised.

Gandhi’s moral-political thought that deviated from mainstream western concepts based on individualism was being considered a new weapon in the
hands of the oppressed. The charismatic and benevolent fatherly figure that Gandhi possessed had two-fold implications for women. One was that the participation by women in political activities under the leadership of Gandhi saw no opposition from the family patriarchs. The other was that Gandhi’s ideology began to underline many attempts for emancipation of oppressed groups, including women.

This phase formed the basis for the contemporary IWM. The developments during this period formed the backdrop against which the Indian constitution was framed. This influence on the Constitution was important because it became the sole guarantor of justice and freedom in independent India. The experiences of the nationalist struggle translated into many provisions of equality and gender justice in the Indian Constitution and law. In the succeeding chapter I review some important provisions of gender-justice in the Indian Constitution and law, and assess their effectiveness in practice.
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187
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